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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that film courses are useful because they sensitize students both to the artistic qualities of film expression and to equivalent qualities in other forms of expression. The objectives of a film course at Michigan State University are: to develop the students' knowledge of the film medium and through that knowledge develop a critical appreciation of film and other artistic media; to make the students aware of their cultural heritage; and to teach students writing skills be dealing directly with principles of writing in the classroom and by using film materials as models for students' writing. An approach to teaching the films "Bonnie and Clyde," "High Noon," and "My Darling Clementine" in terms of their cultural relevance is outlined. Other films discussed in relation to various thematic topics include: "The Crucible," "The Scarlet Letter," "The Seventh Seal," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Innocents," "Billy Budd," "Desire Under the Elms," "An Occurence at Owl-Creek Bridge," and "Greed." (TS)

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AMERICA ON FILM: A HUMANITIES COMPOSITION COURSE

Probably because of the longstanding academic tradition that anything that is popular with the general public is intellectually suspect, motion pictures and other visual media have often been regarded in many quarters of university life as the enemies of the written and plastic arts and as deterrents to the development of verbal skills in college students. Disregarding the fact that motion pictures may have their own artistic value, some academicians tend to decry their effect on the young and to condemn film courses in college as attempts to sell popular courses to students at the expense of real substance. Yet even granting that their exposure to films and television has led today's young people to be less verbal and less interested in reading and writing than in the past, film courses can be justified not only on their own merits but on the argument that they sensitize students both to the artistic qualities of film expression and to equivalent qualities in other forms of expression as well. Film can function not only as an end in itself but as a means--an effective means of educating students exactly because it is a familiar and popular medium, one whose language they have heard all their lives, feel comfortable with and understand. Therefore, rather than condemning it for its past sins--real or imagined--against literacy, educators should instead embrace it as a means of developing students' critical and aesthetic appreciation and their writing and verbal skills as well. Both the popularity and the success of the "America on Film" course in the Department of American Thought and Language (ATL) at Michigan State University indicate the way in which films can be used both as ends and as means.

One of four departments in the University College at Michigan State, ATL, along with the Departments of Humanities, Social Science, and Natural Science, is charged with providing all Michigan State students with a general education to supplement their specialized training. Our primary responsibility is to teach them to write; at the same time we attempt to develop in the students some basic appreciation for and knowledge of their social, political, and cultural heritage as Americans. The core "American Expression" course attempts to deal with that heritage primarily on an historical basis, while various "tracks" or offshoots from the core course may take their own particular approach or tangent. Therefore, according to their own inclinations, students may enroll in the "American Expression" course or in, for example, the

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"Minorities" track, the "Women's" track, the "Major Documents" track, the "Radical" track, the "Humanities" track--or if they're fortunate enough to get in, the "Film" track (now officially a separate course). All of the courses attempt to deal with particular areas or issues of American life, and through the reading materials dealing with those issues to provide the students both with material and inspiration for their writing exercises. It is with the film track as with all other tracks: the students have required readings; they write themes; they study American culture. Specifically, the aims of the film track are threefold: (1) to develop the students' knowledge of the film medium and through that knowledge a critical appreciation of both film and other artistic media; (2) through the use of films and related readings to make the students aware of their cultural heritage; (3) to teach students writing skills by directly dealing with principles of writing in the classroom and by using film materials and related readings both as subject matter and models for students' writing.

Only in the first of these three goals is the ATL film track typical of other film courses, and even then it is more elementary than most. Accepting film as a legitimate form of modern art, we attempt to teach our students enough of its principles, techniques and qualities to allow them to appreciate films on a more sophisticated level and to judge them by more learned standards. What we teach is very basic, of course, corresponding to the level of our freshmen students; our course is the equivalent of an English Department's introductory course in fiction, poetry, or drama. As in all such introductory courses, our hope is that the principles taught in our course will have carryover effects into other areas: Perhaps the student who learns how idea is wedded to form in film, how character is developed through dialogue and action, how conflict is reinforced through mood and setting will become sensitive to equivalent techniques in other forms of art as well and will also appreciate them more. But it is always "perhaps" in a course taught on such a basic level. If the student learns the basic language of filmmaking, learns elementary techniques, begins to determine how various effects are achieved in film--if he becomes a more enlightened film <u>viewer</u>--at least one of the aims of the film course is fulfilled.

Many of the instructors in the film track require a film text for only the first quarter of the three-quarter freshman sequence; some only recommend such a text. Because of our threefold concentration, we cannot justify either the time or the expense of great concentration on studying the film as film. We are supposed to teach American <u>thought</u> and American <u>language</u>,

and we cannot abstract the films too much either from their cultural relevance or from their function as materials and models for writing. Their cultural relevance can in itself be twofold, because they provide a means of discussing not only the era with which they deal but also the era in which they were made. In treating Bonnie and Clyde, for example, the ATL instructor might use the occasion of the film to discuss the Depression era with his class, since the film deals with that period; but since the film also reflects the period of intense self criticism America was going through in the late 1960s, he might well use the attitudes reflected by Penn in the film as a basis for discussing the 60s. In the same way, in treating two Westerns we screened this year, High Noon and My Darling Clementine, we were provided with the opportunity of discussing the West as it was in the 1900s and the West as it exists in the minds of modern Americans. Moreover, since the films themselves reflect different uses of the American Western myth--one to reinforce the stereotype and one to criticize society--we were able to discuss with the classes the two eras in which the films were made--the relatively uncritical 1940s and the incipiently "socially aware" 1950s. By comparing the past as depicted with the present in which it is depicted, we are thereby able to make our students more aware of America's and other societies' attitudes towards the particular concepts depicted in such films--individualism, violence, heroism, mobility, and so on. A couple of examples from some recent discussion/theme topics may indicate the possibilities for exploring social and cultural implications that the film offer:

> In Westerns such as High Noon and My Darling Clementine we seem to accept a man's killing another for the sake of honor, while in films about contemporary situations, such as West Side Story we regard such killing as wasteful and tragic. Why the difference in our attitudes?
>
> The Western and the gangster film are considered two indigenous products of the American film industry and of American culture. Why? What parallels exist between the two types of films?

Theme and discussion topics such as these allow the students to develop insights through the films into their own cultural and social standards.

Because discussion of these films seems more "relevant" to the students, they tend to become more enthusiastic, not only in discussing such issues in the classroom but also in dealing with them in their writing. For each film screened, we provide the students with a list of "discussion questions," which they are supposed to study before seeing the films so that they will look at them more critically and which they are supposed to use afterwards both to discuss the films among themselves and for classroom discussions. The

combination of the films and the possibility of open discussion has generated more classroom discussion than I have experienced in any of the other courses I have taught either at Michigan State or at other universities. In addition, if the theme topics are challenging enough, the students are moved to write with greater fervor and imagination than they might with topics they are not so vitally caught up in. I recently had to give a student a reluctant "A" on his last theme after he wrote a very energetic denunciation of My Darling Clementine (which I had earlier informed the class was my favorite Western and my particular selection for inclusion in the course that quarter) as a lousy film. He had written mechanically sound but uninspired papers before: they never really "developed" ideas; they sort of skipped from one to another. This time, inspired by a determination to prove that his taste and his judgment were legitimate--and perhaps simply by a desire to disagree with his instructor--he argued with vigor and logic and determination. Although such a striking transformation is rare, the subjects are more amenable to the students' dealing with both relevant and substantial topics, very often within their sphere of interest.

In addition, watching the films gives the students greater sensitivity to the qualities of expression that they themselves may eventually learn to incorporate into their own writing. In this way, the films become "models" for their own writing, despite the difference in language. By learning to look at films more critically, they also learn how elements of filmic "language," such as lighting, editing, focus, camera angles, pace, and so on affect what a film says and the way it says it. They can learn about structure, about the suggestive power of language, about precision in dialogue. From reading essays about the films they can learn principles of critical writing and see how professional essays are organized, and developed. The films and reading material can therefore serve as models for certain principles that the students can incorporate into their own writing, although their primary purpose remains to provide ideas which the students can deal with in their own way.

Until this year, the film course and the other tracks were required to follow the chronological arrangement of the core "American Expression" courses. Fall quarter courses dealt with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century materials and topics; winter quarter dealt with the nineteenth century; spring quarter with the twentieth. Concurrent with this chronological breakdown in subject matter, each quarter also had a particular focus for the development of the students' writing skills. Fall quarter concentrated on

structural considerations: on the achievement of unity in student themes, on proper organization and effective development. Winter quarter dealt with sentence structure and style, with the achievement of more effective rhetoric through improved emphasis and variety in the students' writing. Spring quarter courses taught the students methods of research and the proper ways to use outside sources in their own writing. Although the division of writing objectives seemed practical enough, the chronological division did not work well for many of the tracks which were not particularly historically oriented. It was difficult to fit the material of the track either to the designated historical era or to the writing objectives for that quarter. For the film track, for example, there were not a great many films available to deal with the Puritan or colonial periods--let along the problem of relating those films and their materials to the principles of structuring student themes. After a second-hand look at the Puritans via Miller's The Crucible or a silent view of them in The Scarlet Letter, it was difficult to find effective films about America's early period. We could sing our way through the American Revolution in 1776, but we didn't have the funds to fight our way through it in Drums Along the Mohawk; so it was sometimes difficult to work our way through fall quarter to the relative abundance of films about nineteenth-century America available for the winter quarter courses. Something of the difficulty may be shown by the fact that Bergman's The Seventh Seal was shown last fall quarter as a means of illustrating "Puritan thought."

That same film was used in the fall quarter of this academic year, but more fruitfully and according to a new division of courses that is both more suitable to the medium being taught and to the writing objectives for each quarter. This year, while the American Expression courses have retained their chronological arrangement, the other tracks have been allowed to create formats most suitable to their own aims and issues. Since students are allowed to move from track to track, all tracks have retained the old composition format, so that a student switching from, say, American Expression to the women's track in spring quarter will still be assured of having had concentration on stylistic matters in the winter and will deal with research-writing skills in the spring. But the tracks are now better able to match their subject matter to those compositional aims, as well as to evolve a breakdown of subjects more natural to their own particular concerns. In the film track, we therefore decided to have the fall quarter course concentrate on basic principles. We chose some films which would exemplify the principles of filmmaking and film appreciation--that is why The Seventh Seal made its

reappearance this year, followed shortly by Citizen Kane, so that both films could be used not only to demonstrate film technique but also to make the students aware of film quality. All other films chosen for that quarter were adaptations of literary works: Bartleby, The Fall of the House of Usher, The Innocents, Billy Budd, Desire Under the Elms, An Occurrence at Owl-Creek Bridge, Greed. The students read the works and saw the films. By having them do so, we felt that we could make them aware of the compositional principles of each medium and also of the principles which the two media share. With this comparative study providing both example and inspiration, we then attempted to make the students aware of the principles of their own expository form of writing. As an example of the kinds of parallels we try to draw, let me quote from one of the instructors' course descriptions:

> Although the rhetoric of film and the rhetoric of fiction differ significantly from the rhetoric of the critical essay, the three genres also share some basic principles. The best movies, fiction, and essays are built upon a single dominant attitude, problem or theme. This does not mean a "moral" is to be found in every good film, novel, or essay, but it does mean that the director, author, or writer has a singular impression which he wishes to leave with the reader (Unity). Materials which do not contribute to that impression are carefully edited out, while scenes, details, and examples which support the "thesis" are the best or most effective ones which the director, author, or writer could choose (Completeness). The amount of space and/or time allowed as well as the arrangement of materials insures that proper emphasis is given to the major theme of the work of art or critical essay. Trite and faulty accentuation is avoided (Emphasis). The transitions between sentences and among paragraphs in the essay and the continuity of the film and novel are smoothly handled by those who have mastered their crafts. Except in special cases, the "nuts and bolts" of the construction are not visible. The work of art hangs together well (Coherence). In both verbal and visual mediums mechanical accuracy is understood. Inaccuracies make reading and viewing difficult and interfere with the sharing between author and reader or director and viewer.[1]

With that compositional base hopefully firmly established in the fall quarter, we can then turn to the second and third of our three goals in the spring and winter quarters--never losing sight, of course, of the particular writing goals we were to attain each quarter while dealing with our other concerns. Of those three foci--writing, American culture, films--film gets its share of the emphasis in the winter quarter, during which the course emphasis is film genres. This past quarter we chose the gangster film, the Western, the adventure film, the comedy, the monster film. We will, of course, vary our genre selections in the future; but whatever the genre

treated, such a focus for winter quarter is particularly fruitful because we can concentrate not only on the conventions of that particular type of filmic literature but also on the cultural implications inherent in the genre. Clearly a study of the stereotyped qualities of a gangster film leads to a study of the society which promotes and accepts those stereotypes.

The course to be taught in the spring will be based on an "American problems" approach to the films, so that the third aim of the course--the use of materials to reflect our cultural heritage--will be emphasized. The most obviously issue-oriented films seem to deal with economic, social, or historical problems. We will be showing films like The Grapes of Wrath, On the Waterfront, All the King's Men, and A Place in the Sun. Others, like Adam's Rib and The Magnificent Ambersons, deal less obviously with "problems": but all provide opportunities for discussion of and research into the particular social problems or issues they deal with. With the films for this quarter as with the films for the previous quarters, the selections are not always the ones we would like most to have. With a limited budget, we try to fit what we can into a workable format, and so far, the films seem to have worked reasonably well.

In fact, the film course has easily become the most popular of the ATL offerings, its enrollment limited only by the number of sections being taught, the number of seats available in the film arena, and the number of screenings per week that we can afford. Despite that fact--or perhaps because of it--the course is facing difficulties: films and special materials cost money, and university officials want to cut costs wherever they can; the course is popular and is therefore immediately suspected of not doing its job of teaching writing. However, both student reaction and past assessments of their improvement in writing skills would seem to indicate just the opposite. When he originated the course in the late sixties, Professor Herbert Bergman ran a controlled study of the effects of the film course on the students' development of writing skills. Over a full academic year, his control groups, which did not see films but read the same materials as the film-viewing groups and wrote on the same topics, showed an average improvement of 10.5 points, based on a comparison of their writing at the beginning of each quarter and their writing at the end of the quarter. Although the film-viewing group had one less classroom period than the control group (the film group's equivalent period being the time they attended the film showings), they nevertheless averaged a 14.43 improvement over the full year, while the control group averaged only a 10.5 improvement.

The widest difference occurred in the fall quarter, when the film-viewing group achieved a 19.5 point improvement factor, while the control group scored only 5.1.

In addition, the students' comments indicated not only that the enthusiasm they felt for the films was transferred to their theme writing but also that they could translate the qualities they perceived in the films into qualities they could perceive in writing. I will cite only two or three examples from the study:[2]

> "The course is different. It made classic books take on a new light; it gave me a greater appreciation of the power of the written word in this visual society."
>
> "My main aim was to fulfill my ATL requirements. This course actually made this requirement enjoyable, and therefore I feel I put more effort in to the work and accordingly got more out of the course. The big advantage to me was simply that it offered a class that was enjoyable to take, even though I'm not interested in most types of English and writing courses."
>
> "The films helped me to improve my writing skills. They made ATL a lot more enjoyable, thus encouraging a good attitude and harder work."

If these reactions indicated that real learning of skills or appreciation of more traditional art forms were being replaced by a mere ephemeral form of entertainment, I would find them disturbing. But aside from film's claim to being an art form in its own right, it appears also not to be substituting for but to be complementing and reinforcing the students' learning in other important areas. Hopefully, as university budgets grow tighter and tighter, the popularity of this medium, will not be used as an excuse for choking off what is proving to be one of the most effective means of reaching students' minds.

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[1] From Course Description for America on Film, Professor Nancy H. Pogel, Fall, 1974.

[2] Figures and quotes are taken from Bergman's monograph, Fiction and Film: Their Use in Teaching, Writing and Reading at the College Level, to be published by Michigan State University in 1975.